

Collett's Role in Cuban Missile Crises of October 1962

by Richard Gregory

In October 1962, Collett was deployed as part of the Cuban Missile Crises to monitor and perhaps block the Russian subs exiting from Vladivostok via the Hokkaido Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido.

None of us knew at that time how close we came to nuclear war. And certainly I, as a very junior officer having reported aboard a day or two before we deployed for Hokkaido, did not know until years later that the Russian conventional subs we were supposed to block carried torpedoes with nuclear warheads!

All I remember is boring very cold nights on watch eyeing the lights on the Japanese shorelines and on our return to Yokosuka running through a Japanese fishing fleet at night where they seemed to want to get their nets cut by getting in our way so the US Navy would pay for new ones. We never saw or detected a sub so far as I know.

Fortunately for us, the very same four subs involved in this incident off of Cuba had departed Vladivostok before we arrived. And they were each carrying a single nuclear warhead torpedo which at least one captain, if not all, wanted to use because they felt they were being attacked by our shipmates who were harassing them with explosives to keep them away from our carriers.

In any case we were all lucky that Vasily Arkipov, the Russian Flotilla commander kept his head and prevented nuclear war as described in documents (which are included in the links below).

In other earlier accounts of the incident, notably the more dramatic Wikipedia account based on earlier reviews of what happened during the crises in several studies, Vasily is given even more credit for saving the world, and us, by refusing to authorize the use of nuclear torpedoes against our harassing sister ships- apparently two old destroyers and one 692 class.

Vasily later was head of the Soviet Naval Academy and apparently had a lot of credibility in the Russian Navy at the time of the incident because he had led the efforts to contain the nuclear disaster aboard the Russian Nuclear sub that had a meltdown. He had reportedly led the rescue team into the damaged reactor. Many of that team apparently later died of radiation poisoning. Quite a guy.

So give a toast to Vasily. And hope there are others like him.

The links below are updates of the history of the Cuban Missile Crises:

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2022-10-03/soviet-submarines-nuclear-torpedoes-cuban-missile-crisis>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasily_Arkipov